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Altered States of Consciousness And Ritual

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Altered States of Consciousness (ASCs) are an integral part of ritual. They can be defined as any mental state recognized by the individual as different from his or her normal waking consciousness. As such, the act of separating yourself from the mundane world, having a ritual bath or shower and preparing the ritual space, is enough to induce some sort of ASC in most people. Taking on a magical persona involves an ASC, as does invocation of godhead, dancing or chanting to raise power, meditation, scrying, and going through a guided visualization or path-working.

The use of ASCs in magic and ritual has many benefits. By means of a guided visualization or path-working you can have experiences that would harm you or be impossible in the mundane world. For example, in a visualization relating to fire you can stand in the midst of a roaring fire or become the flame itself; experiences which might deepen your understanding of the element fire. Another experience reached through ASCs is that of the god or goddess being called down upon you, something that enriches and enlivens your magical life.

Entering an ASC is normally part of the process of stepping onto the astral plane, reaching the Otherworld, tapping racial memory or the collective unconscious, contacting inner guides or obtaining information from your own unconscious. To raise power, many enter an ASC by dancing, chanting or using breathing techniques. It's then much easier to focus your concentration, draw on energy, and let it flow through you and into the object of the spell.

Simple ASCs shouldn't be forgotten. Being able to relax the first time you cast a circle in front of everyone might help you remember the words, and will certainly help you focus the power you need. Meditation is another fundamental skill in magical arts, one that is used at all stages.

Some ASCs can help you find out more about yourself. By doing so, you can understand and remove the beliefs and blocks that prevent you from developing, from using your magical abilities to their full extent. These blocks are erected as part of the process of growing up. As an example, if you're told often enough as a child that the fairies

that you see at the bottom of the garden don't exist, eventually you come to believe it. Understanding and getting rid of this belief twenty years later so that you can see the fairies again can be a long process, one which can be speeded up by techniques using certain ASCs.

Like many things, ASCs are tools, often valuable, but also dangerous. One danger is not coming out properly at the end of a ritual. Being in an ASC can feel wonderful and it can be tempting to stay there. You see it happening at some of the New Age workshops, where people get a nice emotional spaced-out high from a session, and hang on to that feeling as long as they can - "workshop junkie". The problem is that in an ASC you do not always have full access to those parts of yourself needed to perform mundane tasks like driving a car, or doing your job satisfactorily. Remaining in an ASC can be quite destructive if you need to function in the "normal" world.

Occasionally an ASC can trigger what is known as an abreaction in someone. Entering the ASC removes the barrier the person has put between their conscious mind and a traumatic experience they've had. As a result the person suddenly goes through the experience again, bursting into tears, yelling with anger, shivering with fear, and so on. This sort of reaction needs to be dealt with therapeutically; telling the person to forget it only makes the experience and any problems it has caused, worse for them. Not only does the person controlling a group ASC experience need to be able to handle such abnormal reactions, but he or she also needs to be able, when putting a new group into ASCs, to recognize individuals with borderline psychoses. The reason is that putting such people into an ASC, especially trance states, can push them over into a full-blown psychosis. For example, putting an epileptic into trance can trigger epileptic seizures.

Control is an important aspect of ASCs. In a ritual, at least one person should remain in control, able to take over and bring the group out if anything goes wrong. That person makes sure that no-one is taken over by an entity which remains after the circle, and that no inappropriate suggestions are made. (In ASCs, especially trance states, you are much more suggestible, and might inadvertently pick up someone else's comment as a suggestion - after all, this is the principle upon which TV advertising is based.) They also make sure that everyone comes out and grounds properly at the end of the ritual.

Another area where control is important is where an ASC is entered from another ASC. Path-working, visualization and scrying is often more intense, more meaningful, if done in circle. This is because when you start to do the path-working or whatever from a mild ASC instead of your own normal waking state, you tend to go further or deeper, and thus gain more from the exercise. However, using drugs to enter an ASC before performing ritual is a completely different matter. Drugs leave you with no control over the first ASC you enter, so the outcome of entering a second one can be quite different from what you expected. The harder the drug, the bigger the problem is likely to be. A drug might, on a rare occasion, have a place in ritual, but only when the effect of the drug on the person taking it is known, there is a very good reason for its use, and someone else is available to deal with any problems that might arise. Drugs also sap the magical will and discipline by preventing you from learning how to achieve the results you desire by yourself, and encouraging you to be lazy. In the end your ritual work suffers.

ASCs are a fundamental part of magical ritual. The basic arts - meditation, concentration and visualization - all involve ASCs in some form. It is easy to get caught up with the glamour of something different, something that feels good, that is outside our normal experience and upbringing, and forget that, like most things, there is a negative side to ASCs. They are a tool; useful once you master them, but dangerous if misused. For many, ASCs have become the basis of their path to spiritual development.

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